

Report on 'Meet the Chief Executive Officer day' at Kew, 16 November 2006

Issues raised by readers	Our response
<p>New self-service copying arrangements. Many readers were concerned about these, particularly about the risk of damage to the records from poor handling by users and insufficient invigilation and staff help. Some suggested that removing the glass covers on the copiers would reduce the risk of damage.</p>	<p>The new arrangements are still being piloted and, in response to these comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The copying area will be redesigned to increase the degree of surveillance and the availability of staff help and instruction • Additional written guidance will be provided • We shall continue to enforce restrictions on what may be copied, in order to protect vulnerable items • The glass covers are designed to protect bound volumes – they provide a flat surface for the copy while the balance cradles below hold the book steady to prevent damage from uneven pressure.
<p>Readers who break the rules and staff who fail to deal with them.</p> <p>Many readers mentioned examples of where a reader was disobeying the rules or handling something poorly after being told, or being rude to staff. They felt that staff didn't seem confident in tackling such behaviour. Consequences were described as a) allows behaviour to continue, b) makes it acceptable to others c) makes the service worse (cards misfiled/ records damaged).</p>	<p>We shall introduce new guidelines and training for staff to overcome this problem.</p>
<p>Dealing with inexperienced users.</p> <p>Many readers were concerned that inexperienced users take up a disproportionate amount of staff time and preventing others from making efficient use of the reading rooms and equipment.</p> <p>Suggestions included:</p>	<p>Yes, this is a problem: every day about 20% of readers are new and their overall numbers have increased by about 25% in the past year, with no corresponding increase in staff funding. We have no intention of banning them since they have as much right to expect access to and help from The National Archives as experienced users.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory inductions • A video on the web • Banning them entirely! 	<p>We have found mandatory inductions to be unpopular and ineffective since they do not meet the individual needs of a range of first-timers. We still offer a voluntary daily induction tour which is fairly well attended. Plans to improve the situation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing an online induction tour, in 2007 • Redesigning the reading room areas and services to deal with first-timers more effectively, within our 'Kew 2008' programme.
<p>Microfilm reading room - expertise and training.</p> <p>Complex room - but staff not always on top of their game. Often give incorrect advice.</p>	<p>We cannot guarantee that staff in the reading rooms will know all the answers. However, they should never give advice of which they are uncertain, without explaining this, and should always refer enquirers to other staff where appropriate.</p> <p>We accept that performance has sometimes slipped and we are reviewing the training and deployment of staff to improve the situation.</p>
<p>Delays between corrections being given to catalogues and finding aids, and them appearing on the revised version</p>	<p>We normally process amendments to catalogue within 10 working days of receipt of the query. This includes investigation, amendment and sending response to the enquirer. Sometimes there is a delay due to the complication of the queries and the need to get expert advice.</p> <p>Documents Online errors are usually corrected within an average of 5 days. The only exceptions occur when they are complex or lead to more wide scale changes.</p> <p>The process for other online products, supplied by Licensed Internet Associate (LIA) partners, is more complex. Firstly comment must be submitted to the LIA provider using the on site tools rather than to TNA or sent via email. This ensures that the comment is tracked within the supplier's change control system which is needed because of the high turnover arising from a global user base of 10 million and over 250 million individual records. Once a comment has been reported it typically gets forwarded and evaluated by a data correction team, although the exact process does depend on the supplier. This team prioritise their workload by the seriousness of the comment - thus systematic errors affecting lots of records</p>

	<p>take priority over individual corrections - this can lead to delays in evaluating individual issues. Once a decision has been made regarding the correction - whether to amend or not - the work can be undertaken on the database. This may not appear in the live environment for some weeks or in the case of smaller more niche databases several months as the databases are typically 'refreshed' at different intervals, although again this will vary between suppliers. Errors are only corrected if it is plain they are errors of fact - a different interpretation of original writing will not be amended, nor will amendments be made where individuals have prior knowledge that an entry should read as something else. All LIA suppliers either have - or have planned - user attributed content systems which allow users to post alternative or additional information against the data entries in the databases - over time it is hoped that this will also build up into a valuable tool for researchers.</p>
<p>What is the policy for appearance on the Independent Researcher List?</p> <p>Some companies have 6 researchers listed - not fair.</p>	<p>This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Our policy will be to restrict groups of researchers to a single entry unless they can demonstrate that they are genuinely offering multiple choices to the public.</p>
<p>Poor catalogues.</p> <p>Many comments on the difficulties of using the Catalogue - from people not understanding the best ways of searching, through to poorly described records, or poor indexes.</p>	<p>Yes, the Catalogue remains uneven in quality despite the many enhancements which have been made. We are putting a great deal of effort into improving it – in the past year almost 1 million new catalogue entries were added. However the size of the challenge is enormous and we do not have the resources to move as quickly as we would like. We are developing a new cataloguing strategy which will include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking more grant funding • Using volunteers in larger numbers • Piloting a 'wiki' element so that readers can input their own details when they know more than we do • Maximising our own resources.
<p>Desire for quiet space separate from spaces where readers and staff can talk</p>	<p>The 'Kew 2008' plans are likely to include separate quiet zones in both the enquiry and</p>

	the reading rooms
Desire for the Maps and Large Documents Reading Room to stay as it is	We have no plans to make significant changes. We do however hope to improve the lighting the facilities for consulting maps within our 'Kew 2008' Programme.
<p>Digitisation</p> <p>A range of comments, eg</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why don't we become a commercial company and digitise ourselves? • Why do we charge? • Lack of clarity in our interpretation of intellectual property rights • Why are we focusing our digitisation on genealogy at the expense of records of interest to academics? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digitising is very expensive – way beyond TNA's funding levels. We estimate the cost of digitising all of our holdings as over £40 billion. We therefore need external commercial investment to make it happen and to support the ongoing marketing and running costs of online products. TNA is obliged to allow commercial companies to re-use its material so even if we were able to develop our own services, these would need to compete against commercial products. Therefore, we believe that we are doing the right thing in working with commercial companies to digitise our holdings themselves. What we do to protect the nation's records is: • We charge to refund investment costs and to plough money back into developing new services • Regarding intellectual property rights, all rights in the digital material are retained by TNA and all rights granted are non-exclusive • The focus of the digitisation programme to date has been genealogy as that is the most established market, however TNA is now working with other partners to provide digital resources to other sectors and will be announcing plans to offer digital access to the State Papers Domestic, the State Papers Colonial and some Slave Registers in 2007, with more to follow.
Risk of loss of expertise when specialist staff retire	<p>We recognise that we are currently hitting a particularly challenging period where some staff with 30+ years of experience are retiring – and hiring people with equivalent experience is just going to be impossible. Therefore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We try to capture the expertise of staff before they leave. In the case of records experts much of it has already been

	<p>included in publications, research guides and catalogues and/or passed on to other staff through training and mentoring.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We also use succession planning to prepare or recruit staff to fill gaps left by departing staff.
<p>Publishing.</p> <p>Some views expressed about how we could sell our books better. Ideas included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Posters and promotion points around the reading room, particularly for relevant books such as <i>Tracing Your Ancestors</i> b) More selling into US markets c) We should reprint our older reference guides, as there was still a market for them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Yes, we shall try this b) We appointed a US trade distributor at the beginning of the year and sales have increased 500% c) Usually we have not reprinted because they weren't selling well. There was no commercial market to justify reprinting without updating to a new edition - which of course involves extra expense. We are evaluating print-on-demand and e-publishing options for this sort of material however which may make it viable.
<p>Lack of understanding of the new security rules about stapling papers together.</p>	<p>We believe that forged papers have been inserted in the archives. This is subject to police investigation. Our first duty is to preserve and maintain the integrity of the archives and the new rules are designed to prevent this from happening again. Thank you all for bearing with us, as we know that these new rules are not universally popular.</p> <p>In our plans to redesign the reading rooms in the Kew 2008 project we are reviewing the security arrangements, and considering introducing differential security for the original document handling areas vs. the other areas. This should relieve some of the problems.</p>
<p>Flood defence.</p> <p>Reassurance wanted we'd have a plan if the flood defences failed.</p>	<p>We monitor this potential threat closely. We have the capacity to move the archives above the 'worst case' flooding levels.</p>

<p>Research guides.</p> <p>Mix of views. Not seen as detailed enough by specialists, and 'too dense' by beginners. Should we have a two level approach?</p>	<p>We recognise that we can never meet the widely varying needs of all readers. However, the research guides are only one way into the records and for many subjects a combination of staff help and alternative guidance, online or in the reading rooms, can remedy their limitations. We are investing significant effort into improving our advice to users by improving the research 'channels' on our website and harnessing our 'global search' engine to enable each enquirer to follow a more personalised route.</p>
<p>Fears about closure next year for refurbishment.</p> <p>These related to the plans for transferring the Family Records Centre to Kew and the reorganisation of the Kew reading rooms.</p>	<p>We will do everything we can to avoid having to close to accommodate works, but it may be unavoidable. We will give as much notice as possible on our website and onsite if closures are necessary.</p>
<p>Put posters in the Microfilm reading room reminding people about the purpose of the blue/ red boxes (moving the boxes to next to the staff desk commended as 'the best action done in ages').</p>	<p>Good idea. We shall do this.</p>
<p>What should readers do if they find a document which is damaged?</p> <p>A few people mentioned that there is a lack of clear advice about this.</p>	<p>Most readers report damage at the Information or document returns desks adjoining the reading room. We shall put up some written guidance on this.</p>
<p>Free research by Record Copying Staff.</p> <p>The independent researcher community is concerned that staff are doing free research for those enquiring about photocopying orders.</p>	<p>We've checked this out – and don't believe we're doing this! As advertised, staff do up to 20 minutes research per order in order to find the items requested, but no more.</p>
<p>Fire alarm</p> <p>A few mentions that the last test didn't work well (readers went in lots of different directions etc).</p>	<p>We have adjusted procedures to prevent a recurrence.</p>
<p>Post World War One military service records Many readers wished to know when they would be able to access these records.</p>	<p>These records are retained by the Ministry of Defence and cannot yet be opened to public access since they remain in use for administrative purposes and since they give personal details of people who are still alive and are subject to the Data Protection Act.</p>

	<p>The record series and individual files often incorporate material from wide spans of years up to the 1950s and it is not possible to extract earlier material for transfer.</p> <p>We are in discussion with the Ministry of Defence about how and in what form they might be transferred when administrative and data protection issues recede. The bulk of the records is so huge that we expect to accession the records as microfilm or digital copies.</p>
<p>Requests for longer hours of opening</p>	<p>Unfortunately there is no prospect of us being able to afford this. Our funding from the government will diminish in real terms over the next 4 years, so our priority is maintaining current opening hours and service levels to the current standards.</p>
<p>Requests for reductions in price of photocopying</p>	<p>Our copying charges are subject to HM Treasury regulations for full cost recovery. Under these regulations costs include a proportion of our very high accommodation and building maintenance expenses and are therefore much higher than day to day running costs.</p> <p>In fact, most of our charges have reduced in real terms over recent years because of efficiency improvements.</p>